

*The exhibit of the Sisters of Notre Dame was highly commended and at the close of the Fair, which lasted six months, a diploma and medal were awarded to fifteen of our houses in Massachusetts, Lowell's parish and day schools being among the favored ones. See XIII., Columbus, Queen Isabella, and*

# Annals from the Archives

## Holy Name Church Fire, Chicopee, MA 1910



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Holy Name Church

Chicopee, MA

1892

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—The writing style and level of detail of the various Annalists who kept the histories of the Notre Dame convents was as varied as the women themselves. Some described the events and activities of the sisters intimately. Others used a wide brush to present an overview of the sisters' lives. The Annalist for the Holy Name Convent in Chicopee, MA, during the late 1890s and early 20th century was a dramatic and detailed writer, fond of using exclamation points for emphasis. Her dramatic flair was especially evident in her description of the unexpected storm that descended upon the city of Chicopee on Saturday, July 30, 1910.

As was customary every summer, the sisters left Chicopee for their ten day retreat at the "Lake" in Worcester in late July. All but two of the sisters returned to Chicopee the 29th. The next day, on Saturday, July 30th, the pastor of the Holy Name Church, Fr. Conlin, came to welcome the sisters home. It was a normal muggy summer day, and the local papers predicted "unsettled weather," along with the possibility of a passing shower. No one expected the violent storm that swept through Chicopee and the surrounding towns that afternoon.

As the sisters and Fr. Conlin shared pleasantries during his visit, dark clouds began to shadow the convent. Just before 3:00 p.m., a flash of lightning pierced the darkness at the same moment a loud clap of thunder shook the building. They all realized that the lightning must have hit something close by. Jumping up, they hurried to the window. Through the torrential downpour, they were horrified to see smoke rising from the Holy Name Church and realized the lightning had struck the steeple.

The Chicopee fire department arrived quickly, but the engineer in charge of the local station was away, leaving the work to less experienced men. Though they had brought chemicals with them, hoping it would keep the fire from spreading, they had little experience with their use. In addition, once the men climbed up to the roof, they realized the heat was too intense for the chemicals to be applied. Instead, they tried to keep the blaze contained with the water from the fire hoses.

The two sisters who remained in Worcester after the retreat had ended were returning just as lightning struck the church. The Annalist wrote that they [the sisters] "*had just reached the head of this street, when a young man seated in front of them turned and said, "Sister, the church has just been struck!" Leaving the car they saw great forks of flame leaping out from the sides of the steeple, the cross still intact pointed heavenward yet, but the red tongues were creeping toward it! They were obliged to come down a street behind the church, so dense was a crowd blocking the one that led to the convent. All the way*

down that little street they could see the flames higher and higher reaching out, till at last the great cross is within their grasp! Then they circled around it! Oh what a sight! The cross burning far up toward the heavens!"

The Annalist wrote that the firefighters worked hard to save the steeple. But as was common in those days, the hoses were not designed to shoot water any higher than 100 feet. The Annalist described in harrowing details the efforts of the men and the dangers they faced.

*"The firemen who had gone up on the roof of the church, seeing that there was no hope of saving the cross, tried to get down before it fell; all had reached the ground but four, these finding no means of escape clung to the roof. It was simply miraculous! Great burning brands fell right and left of them; sometimes resting for a second beside them, then, with their own momentum, leaping to the ground! While the cross was falling, one would say almost that dense throng did not breathe! . . . The cross was scarcely down when streams of white smoke broke from the ridge of the roof of the church! Consternation was in every eye!"*

Not long after, the Williamsette Fire Department—only two and a half miles away—arrived, followed by the Springfield fire department, which was about four miles distant. Despite the combined efforts, they could not save the cross or steeple. Fortunately, unlike many other churches, including St. Patrick's in Lowell, which was decimated by fire in 1904, the Holy Name Church had a special protection, one that was ultimately responsible for saving the church.

Beneath the steeple was a thick plate of tin that had been added during its construction in 1857 to keep rainwater, snow and ice from seeping into the belfry windows. It was a fortunate addition, because the plate kept the fire from spreading to the timbers below and saved the church. Though there was some damage to the roof, it was not enough to keep the parishioners from continuing to use it for Masses and other services. After the steeple's destruction, the parish erected a new steeple, this one made from copper that could not be harmed by fire.

But the old saying that lightning does not strike twice did not prove true for the Holy Name Church. Just nine years later, on September 9, 1919, lightning struck the steeple once again not long before 10 p.m. Though the steeple was not harmed, the electricity raced down the copper wire from the steeple to the electrical wires leading to the organ. This caused a small fire that was quickly extinguished, though the organ's motor was destroyed. The organ was eventually repaired and the sisters were grateful no further damage to the church occurred.



Holy Name Church today  
With new copper steeple

#### Sources consulted for this article

- ◆ Holy Name Convent Annals, 1867-1937.
- ◆ Boston Globe Archives, 1878-2020.
- ◆ Lostnewengland.com
- ◆ *The Metal Worker, Plumber and Steam Fitter*, Volume 74, Part 1, 1910, Page 182.